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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a developmental guidance program on the topic of children and crises from kindergarten through grade eight. Many crises that children may deal with are discussed, including accidents, illness, death of a loved one, family problems, and moving. A crisis education response program developed and initiated to facilitate an adaptive response is presented. The five parts of the program are listed: (1) sharing and exploring ideas and experiences of crises; (2) drawing a picture or writing a story of crisis situations; (3) understanding the types of feelings and thoughts that children have during and after a crisis; (4) activating helpful coping strategies; and (5) identifying the learning outcomes gained from the discussions. Also described is the implementation of this program in second, fifth, and eighth grade classes. The results of the implementation are reported and it is noted that the children learned that they were not alone in their feelings, that they would survive a crisis, and that talking with someone was helpful. It is also noted that both teachers and students reported positive responses to the program. A policy on crisis intervention is recommended for schools. An appendix includes an outline of the children and crises program. (Author/ABL)

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CHILDREN AND CRISES: A DEVELOPMENTAL GUIDANCE APPROACH

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Running Head: Crises

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Abstract: Children and crises: A developmental guidance approach

This paper describes a developmental guidance program to the topic of children and crises for students from kindergarten to grade eight. There were five main phases to the program: (1) sharing and exploring ideas and experiences of crises, (2) drawing a picture or writing a story of crises situations, (3) understanding the types of feelings and thoughts children have during and after a crises, (4) activating helpful coping strategies and (5) identifying the learning outcomes gained from the discussions.

The results indicated that the discussions were very popular with both students, and teachers. Common crises identified were (a) Accidents, (b) Illness (c) Death of loved one (including pets), (d) Family problems (Especially divorce and violence), (e) Moving and (f) Coping with their own feelings.

Students learned (a) they were not alone in their feelings (b) they initially tended to blame themselves (c) that one lived through a crisis and that the painful feelings changed and (d) it helped to talk to someone about the crisis (i.e. parent, teacher, conselor or friend). Teachers noticed that (a) they quickly learned a lot about some of the emotional issues facing their students, (b) students were attentive to each other and that classroom climate improved and (c) students seemed to grasp a better understanding of themselves and how to handle crises situations.

CHILDREN AND CRISES:

A DEVELOPMENTAL GUIDANCE APPROACH

A recent report in the **Guidepost** (Schappi, 1985) on elementary school counseling indicated a tremendous upswing of problems and crises facing the elementary school aged child. From the perspective of the field this has been our experience too over the past fifteen years. However, to a certain extent crises are inevitable and we will all experience them throughout our lives.

In response to a crisis a child can react with adaptive and/or maladaptive behaviors, both of which can have important implications for long term functioning. Ideally, we need to train children ahead of time for crises events and provide them with a set of coping skills. These might include (a) an understanding of what constitutes a crisis event, (b) an awareness of the types of feelings and thoughts that become activated by crisis, (c) the change in feeling and thought that occurs over time and with help, and (d) the type of coping strategies and behaviors that help in a time of crisis.

This paper describes our guidance project that sought to help children develop the above skills.

Literature Review

Contemporary crisis theory stems from the work of Caplan (1964) and Lindemann (1979) who worked together and formulated a model for the prevention and treatment of crises reactions.

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They emphasized a preventive thrust and put this into practise by opening the first Community Mental Health Clinic in the United States. Caplan worked originally with refugee children from World War II and Lindemann counseled survivors and families of the bereaved from the 1944 Coconut Grove Night Club fire. Lindemann noticed two major patterns to this catastrophe: one pattern led to restoration of normal emotional functioning and the other to the development of symptoms and impaired functioning. These findings led to an interest in understanding what conditions facilitate recovery from a crisis event.

Definitions. Crisis is usually defined as a variant of stress which is so severe that the individual becomes disorganized and is unable to function effectively (Janosik, 1983). Crisis is a subjectively perceived event which threatens individual needs or meaningful experiences. Crisis reactions often become a cycle of mounting tension, anxiety, and ineffective coping. The ability to think, plan and act becomes impaired (Caplan, 1964).

Lindemann (1979) emphasized the "hazardous" qualities of the event. He saw a hazardous quality as a sudden change in the social field within which a person exists. This would include social relationships and an individual's expectation of him or herself.

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Crises often fall into two major categories: (a) Developmental Crises which are universal and are often experienced while negotiating developmental tasks and (b) Situational Crises such as injury, disaster or human action beyond ones own control (i.e. death, divorce, illness). A person's reaction to a developmental or situational crisis will reflect their past experience, personality and problem solving skills. A critical ingredient here is a person's vulnerability to stress.

In order to determine how a person or child responds to stress, Critchley (1981) suggests one must look at the interaction between risk events and vulnerability factors. By vulnerability he is referring to hereditary and congenital factors which either increase or decrease a child's susceptibility to psychological and environmental stressors.He records that low risk coupled with high vulnerability led to maladaptive patterns of behavior while high risk coupled with low vulnerability led to a surprising absence of disorders. Sandler (1980) found that mediating environmental influences (such as the presence of two healthy parents and older siblings) played a critically important role in successful resolution.

Types of Crises Affecting Children

In an extensive study using the Stress Inventory Test, Sandler and Ramsay (1980) found that Loss Events (such as

death of a parent, sibling, friend and divorce and separation) were the main eliciters of crisis reactions in children followed by Family Troublem (abuse, neglect, and economic reversals such as loss of job). Lower down on the scale were Primary Environmental Change (moving, new school, or mother begins work), Sibling Difficulties, Physical Harm (illness, accidents, and violence) and Disasters (fire, floods, earthquakes).

Saunders (1984) has noted that children in a crisis or under constant and extreme stress tend to have pervasive feelings of anxiety, confusion, failure and entrapment. They are frequently sick, largely isolated, unable to concentrate, non-communicative and often use the phrase "I don't know." They also have an uncooperative attitude, are generally negative, defensive and easily angered and unable to see the resources in others.

We have noted a similar pattern of reaction in children in acute crisis to that observed by Kubler-Ross (1969) in response to loss. This involves:

1. Shock and denial.
2. Emergence of intense feelings of grief and anger.
3. Bargaining.
4. Depression and hopelessness.

5. Reduction of intense affect, sometimes accompanied by a sense of resolution and recovery or a sense of detachment and withdrawal from social interaction.

Children do not go through these patterns or stages in a consistent way. Rather they tend to rapidly cycle in or out of the first four levels: one minute denying, the next weeping, then bargaining and so on. The shock or denial stage is often hard for teachers and parents to understand or to relate to positively because it seems the child actively resists their attempts to help. This phase of shock and denial has important protective functions for the child's fragile ego, seeking to protect the child from overwhelming emotions. At this stage the parent or teacher needs to focus on relationship building and empathy.

Method

Using a class discussion format proposed by Allan and Nairne (1984) we devised a discussion on the topic of "Children and Crises." The discussion consisted of six main phases spread over three 40 minutes lessons. First lesson consisted of introductory and exploratory stimulus questions. The students were asked: their meanings of the word crisis and to describe the kinds of crises that affect children The lesson ended with a drawing activity depicting a crisis

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experience that affected a child or children.

In the second lesson, the students are asked to write a story about a crisis situation that happened to them or to someone they knew or heard about. Following this, those that wanted to could read their story or show their picture to the class.

The third lesson focused on understanding and actions. Stimulus questions are asked about how children feel in a crisis situation and what they think about both during a crisis and six months later. They then identify what helps a child in a crisis, what helped them, how they might help others and how parents and teachers can help. Finally, the counselor summarizes the main points of the discussions and asks the children what they have learned.

We ran the project in two grade two classes, two grade five and two grade eight classes. The primary classes focused more on the drawing activity while the grade eights did the writing activity rather than the drawing. Grade five did both activities. (See Appendix A for a copy of the discussion format.)

Results

The discussions were very well received by students and teachers alike. The topic held everybody's attention, there was considerable self-disclosure and a movement, at the end,

towards resolution and closure when students were asked to identify actions that help in a time of crises. There was much disclosure of painful experiences but little evidence of a child being overwhelmed. The genuineness of the material shared seemed to activate support and caring from most of the students. The findings from each level of discussion will now be given using examples of the children's responses.

Meaning of the Word "Crisis"

The word was written on the board and various meanings listed by the brainstorming process. From the listings the class worked towards a composite definition. For the grade twos a crisis was "Trouble, a bad time, a bad problem." Grade five: "When something happens that's a matter of life and death, something that really upsets you"and from grade eights: "An unexpected big problem, without a quick solution, causing great embarrassment, pain and a change of behavior."

Crises Events That Affect Children

During the brainstorming, all classes readily filled the chalkboard with 30 - 40 crises events that happen to children. Following this they were asked to then prioritize the three "biggest crises that happen to children." There was considerable developmental variation here. Grade twos listed: Accidents, loosing a friend or a pet and illness. Teachers of

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these children however, listed divorce, death and fighting at home. Grade fives highlighted death, divorce and fighting with friends while grade eights listed school expectations, family problems and peer pressures well above all other crises.

Writing and Drawing Activities

These activities tended to elicit far deeper expression of feeling and more painful self-disclosure than the verbal discussions of crises events. Also, the more introverted children seemed to find it easier to read their story or show their picture to the class than to just stand up and talk. Some common themes will now be identified.

Accidents

This was very common with the younger children and frequent mention was made of physical pain, cuts, bruises, broken legs, and visits to doctors and dentists. The drawings tended to indicate either the presence or absence of a helping adult. Teachers noted that children who did not have caring parents tended to leave out adult figures from their drawings or stories. One lonely girl drew a sad figure of herself with a broken leg and commented:

> This is when I fell off a trolley, broke my leg and I had to spend the rest of summer just sitting there, not doing anything. I couldn't run around or anything. It was sunny

> and I just had to stay home. I was feeling pretty bad because all my other friends were out there playing. And then when I went back to school, everybody started kicking my leg to see if it hurt. But it hurt me more than it hurt them cause they kicked my toes.

Moving.

This situation was frequently mentioned and activated hurt feelings around leaving friends, grandparents, pets and a favorite or special house. Often anger at parents was mentioned as was fear of going to a new school. Once new friends were found the pain seemed to diminish. One 7 year old girl wrote:

> I had to move from my very best friend. I felt very bad. I cried for a whole week. I told my mom I wanted to move back. She said we couldn't. I felt better after a week because I had her phone number so I could talk to her.

Illness

By illness students were referring to severe illness and emergencies that led to hospitalization. These stories and drawings were all very personal and often had a sense of urgency about them ("My mum came rushing to the bus stop") and a sense of dawning awareness of the reality of severe illness. A grade five boy wrote:

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> One day I heard that my oldest brother was in hospital. It was during the summer so we couldn't go on our summer vacation. The crisis that my brother had was cancer. A few days later when my parents came home from the hospital and my mom was crying because my brother could hardly breath. And that's how he almost died. Now my brother is living and he's working with my third oldest brother. It was a real shock to me. I'm glad he's not dead and that he's living.

Death

The teachers were surprised by both the number of death experiences children reported and how readily children talked about them. They were aware of how close to the surface the feelings still were even though the event may have been some years previously. One boy wrote:

> A crisis is when my cat, Shalimar, was run over by a train. A crisis is when something bad happens and when my cat, Bonnie died too. I felt bad. I still feel bad.

A grade five student when commenting on the death of a relative's baby said: "My aunt told us not to talk about it. That was a crisis for us." Many of the stories centered on pets.

One morning in the summer vacation, I woke up and went downstairs to eat my breakfast. After I got half way through my breakfast, my mom and dad told me that my dog had died, I pushed away my cereal. I thought my mom and dad were joking. My mom said, "I wish I was." I started to cry, my sister did too. I ran into the bathroom and took a kleenex. I tried to stop crying but I could not stop. My mom gave me a hug and tried to cheer me up but it would not work. They told me how she died, she got hit by a car that night. I thought and thought about her. I cried a lot too. All that week I thought about her. We had a talk with my mom and dad. We decided that we would get two more cats. Me and my sister said, "yes', so about a month later we got two cats.

School

Teachers were surprised by the number of students who found school to be a major source of crisis. This was not mentioned by the grade twos, only a few grade fives but many grade eights. The comments centered around failure and embarrassment: "Getting an O on a test," "Trying to learn something new," "Doing your homework causes a crisis involving your mum and teacher." However, when the students wrote about school they tended to focus on issues with friends, especially peer pressure.

Peer Pressure

These stories reflected topics and issues that students would seldom verbalize in the class discussion. They mostly all centered around quasi-illicit activities such as smoking, drugs, alcohol, stealing, shop lifting, sexual contact, running away and huge fights with parents. Many of these crises stories followed a similar theme: a common issue is revealed, then a much deeper struggle, followed by a release of intense affect (often hurt and anger at parents) ending with a resolution whereby the adolescents were able to change their frame of reference from self to an understanding of others. Somehow the process of writing allowed for a cognitive movement. The following is a typical good example of this development by a grade eight girl.

> A friend brought a smoke to school and offered me a drag. I said no right away. I considered it all day. It seemed so harmless so I said I would have just one drag. Once I did, I kept wanting more. We'd skip out lunch and go back in some bushes to smoke. A grade 12 kid came with us sometimes. He always wanted to touch you in private places but I didn't want him to. Since he knew where we went at lunch, he'd come all the time. He'd even take his clothes off and want us to touch him. I didn't want to hang around these people anymore so I quit smoking and stayed with my real friends. I wrote about

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smoking in my diary and my mom saw it. I was really upset. I told her that I had quit a week or so earlier and I wasn't hanging around with that girl anymore. Of course she told my dad. They treated me like an outsider and never trusted me. My dad always said cruel things to me that were totally unnecessary and made rude jokes. I got so mad at times that I didn't want to live anymore. I considered running away and killing myself. I didn't though because I knew even if they didn't act like it, my parents loved me and would be more hurt. I realize now how they must have felt and I never want to hurt them again.

Family Issues

As can be expected this was a major source of crises for some students. They drew and wrote about being overwhelmed by hurt and angry feelings, by being shouted at, put down and physically abused. Uppermost was the pain over separation and divorce. One grade two girl said: "Everything has been ruined and can never be mended." Another grade two student commented: "Every single day is a crisis because no one at home likes me except my mother's help. Whenever I try to ask a question my dad just yells: "Stay out of it." Teachers became aware that in conflictual home situations, seldom did the parents take time to listen to the concerns and worries of the

children and that allowing the children to talk in class helped the children feel better and relieved. Teachers were surprised by how many children tended to blame themselves for their parents' difficulties. One grade eight girl wrote:

> I was so afraid when my parents decided to get a divorce. I thought it was all my fault. My mother kept telling me it wasn't but still I thought I could have done something that would make them not want to be together anymore. Maybe because I was born. The other night, I heard them having an argument because I didn't clear the table well. That's what I thought. My mother said she didn't want me with her, neither did my dad. I thought of running away but knew it wouldn't help. I had to talk to them and ask them why they were getting a divorce. That evening I talked to them and they said it's because they didn't love each other anymore but they still loved me and wanted me to live with each of them. I finally realized it was not my fault.

Violence

Children of all ages were concerned about the violence in the world around them. Certainly a lot of this was derived from what they saw on television or heard about in the news. There were two main categories here: physical violence as in beatings, murder and child sexual abuse and fear of nuclear

holocaust. A grade four boy wrote:

> Yesterday on a show I saw a man who was telling everybody how he murdered 3 girls ages of 8, 10, 12. In his apartments he had lots of girls clothing, pictures, and other things of girls. The girls parents were on television. The mother was trying to explain how her daughter was kidnapped but she couldn't because she was crying. She kept saying she wanted to kill that man. This is a true story. The end.

A grade eight boy drew a nuclear bomb exploding and wrote: "A crisis is what we are doing to our planet earth, cities burning, pain and war. I am scared. I want it to stop but I can't do anything."

Understanding Phase

Once the stories and drawings have been shared, the counselor shifts the focus to helping the students identify the various feelings experienced during a crisis. Once again the board is used for brainstorming and prioritizing. There was much similarity between all groups here in the basic feelings of mad, sad, bad, scared and worried though the older students added more sophisticated words: depressed, nervous, miserable, hysterical, shocked, stunned, desperate, suicidal, frustrated, disappointed, ashamed, embarrassed, guilt and confusion.

Young children's thoughts during a crisis tended to be such action steps as calling for help, running away, praying, playing with toys and trying to forget. Older children talked more deeply about their inner experience, and self blame: "Am I going to die?" The fear of the future "Will this ever end?" "Everything is going wrong!" "More bad experiences will come." "Why is this happening to me?" "What did I do to cause this?" It's all my fault." "You blame yourself."

Six months after a crisis younger children report feeling "happy or glad" while older children report feeling relieved but still thinking about it every now and again: "I was sad for over a year when my parents got divorced." "I still think about the whole thing and feel if I'd done this or that." "Every now and again I think about him" (a friend who was killed). "I feel stupid that I didn't listen to my mum." These and other similar thoughts indicated that there was still a lot of "unfinished psychological business" around.

Action Phase

Discussions during this phase changed the mood of the classes to that of excitement over a positive challenge. At first, in response to the question: "What helps you in a time of crisis?" the students were both surprised and stunned as if nothing would help. However, once they started talking, they generated many action steps. Most of these involved talking to

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parents, teachers, counselors and friends, calling help lines and such actions as punching a pillow, crying, writing in journals, talking to pets, relaxing oneself, and praying to God. The grade eights also relied on talking to parents, counselors and friends but also emphasized their own thinking abilities: "Think your problem over sensibly and try to find the best solution." "Finding out the real problem." "Think about what will happen afterwards." "Consider options: What happens if I do this . . . or this" and "Make a decision for yourself and see how it works. Then get a second opinion."

Termination Phase

In many ways, this was the highlight of the unit as both students and teachers responded positively to the question: "What did you learn from these discussions?" Students reported: "Nearly all of us have had a crisis." "I'm not alone, not the only one." "It's good to talk about these things in class and learn from the other kids." "I learned that a crisis is a time that will pass and you will feel better." "I learned that it is important to care about another person because although they might look strong inside, they might be hurting."

Teachers, in a separate meeting outside of class time, mentioned how surprised they were that students opened up so much about emergencies that were happening with friends and in

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their families. They also commented on the degree of accuracy with which the students understood the feelings of a person in crisis. Teachers felt that the students feelings were very close to the surface and that the discussions seemed beneficial for class climate and peer relations. The discussions enabled them to get to know more of the children better in a short period of time. It was the first time many children had ever really opened up and shared painful experiences. They thought that the children benefitted greatly from the discussions and were able to see crises in a broader context: namely, that other children have crises and handle their feelings in a similar way to them. Finally, the discussions enabled the teachers to identify students who needed and could benefit from one-to-one counseling.

At the end of the guidance unit the counselor summarized the main points. For example:

> In this class, crises were defined as . . . The main crises events affecting children were . . . In response to crises, students felt shock, pain . . . and thought . . . In a time of crises it helped children to talk with parents, teachers, friends and counselors and with time and effective help, the pain of a crisis seemed to move away.

Conclusions

Every school and teacher will have to deal with children in crises. It is important that schools develop a policy on how to help such children and train their teachers in the necessary theoretical understandings of crises events and the basic communication skills required to help children in times of crises. Children need (a) a caring relationship,(b) support and empathic understanding, (c) structure and (d) appropriate information. The teacher needs to (a) assess the condition of the child and the nature and severity of the crisis and, (b) determine whether or not a referral is needed. Group guidance discussions on crises help students talk out their experiences, realize they are not alone, develop an understanding of crises events and learn the value of asking for help.

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APPENDIX A

CHILDREN AND CRISES

1. Introduction

Today we are going to talk about crisis: what the word means and what types of crises children experience. We'll have a chance to write and draw pictures about crises and later we'll look at ways to help children who are in a state of crisis.

a) What does the word "crisis" mean? Let us list the meanings on the board.

b) What experiences or situations might make for a crisis (list on board)?

2. Exploration

a) What kinds of crises affect children? (List on board.)

b) Can you tell us about some of the crises you or children you have known have experienced.

2a. Activity I

Can you draw a picture of a crisis situation? Imagine a crisis scene -- one that happened to you or one that you heard about. Close your eyes for a moment and let your mind drift back . . . what do you see and what do you hear? Try to get the full picture . . . Now open your eyes and start the drawing.

2b. Activity II

Can you write a story about a crisis you have experienced? What led up to the crisis; what was the crisis and what happened later? What did you see or hear about? If

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a crisis has not happened to you, you can write about one you heard of or saw on TV or in a movie. Remember it must have to do with children.

2c. Sharing the Story and the Picture

I would like to hear from you now. Will some of you share your story and picture with us.

3. Understanding

a) How do children feel when they are in a state of crisis (list on board)?

b) What do children think about when in a crisis (list)?

c) What do you think are the strongest thoughts or feelings?

d) Is it hard to help a child in a state of crisis?

e) How might a child think or feel six months after a crisis?

4. Action Steps

a) Let's list the activities that might help a child who is experiencing a crisis.

b) When you have been in a state of crisis what helped you (list)?

c) If your friend is in a state of crisis, what can you do to help?

d) If someone in this class is in a state of crisis, how can we help him or her?

e) How can your parents help you?

f) How can your teachers help you?

5. Termination: What did you learn from these discussions?

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